

September 16, 2004

Activists, weather thwart Cape reed spraying

By RICHARD DEGENER Staff Writer, (609) 463-6711, [E-Mail <mailto:rdegener@pressofac.com>](mailto:rdegener@pressofac.com)

CAPE MAY POINT - The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Wednesday said a plan to eradicate the marsh reed phragmites by helicopter is dead, and it will instead try to kill the invasive plants with land-based herbicide applications.

The decision comes after the pesticide-application company, Helicopter Applicators, of Gettysburg, Pa., walked off the job, reportedly because of the many delays caused by both the weather and environmentalists who have dogged the project in recent weeks. The spraying is part of an Army Corps project to restore marshland and replenish beaches from Cape May to Cape May Point.

"They don't want to be part of the project anymore. They don't want to fly and spray for us," Army Corps spokesman Merv Brokke said.

Environmental groups hailed the decision as a partial victory. They want no use of herbicides, but were especially concerned that aerial applications could pose a risk outside the target area. This concern did not seem to subside even when the state Department of Environmental Protection set up equipment to monitor wind speeds and said it would only allow spraying if winds were blowing at less than 10 mph.

"It is a victory. We don't think the ground application poses as serious a risk to neighbors. There is still the issue of whether this is the way to control phragmites, and we don't think it is," said Jane Nogaki, of the New Jersey Environmental Federation.

Cape May Point Mayor Malcolm Fraser said the decision would be costly in both time and money. Aerial spraying would have been quicker and cheaper than walking through acres of thick phragmites stalks to spray the herbicide.

"I have a feeling they were brow-beaten into this position by the environmentalists," Fraser said Wednesday night.

J.B. Smith, the project manager for the Army Corps, said project leaders will meet today and make plans to treat at least 50 acres by land-based methods.

Brokke said the owner of the company, Glenn Martin, said they had other jobs they had to attend to. The spraying of the glyphosate-based herbicide was scheduled for last week. It has been postponed several times by windy and rainy weather, but environmental groups have also raised numerous issues about public notice requirements, butterfly migrations, mixing of the herbicide at the Cape May Airport, wind conditions and Indian artifacts in the swamp. They have even led an e-mail campaign to convince state DEP Commissioner Bradley M. Campbell to get involved.

Martin could not be reached for comment Wednesday. Brokke said Helicopter Applicators was willing to pay any penalties necessary to get out of the contract but made it clear "they would no longer be part of the team."

Brokke said there are no wind issues with land-based applications, although it cannot be raining since the herbicide has to stick to the plants. Brokke said work could begin Friday morning as early as 7:30 a.m. and at least one-hour public notification would be given to schools and municipalities in the area.

Nogaki acknowledged that "the weather helped us" and so did the DEP push to monitor the

winds. Nogaki said the bigger issue is deciding better ways to control the reed, such as using excavation or saltwater tides. Nogaki supplied the media with an opinion from Cornell University professor David Pimentel that suggests elevation modifications and saltwater are the best ways to control the plant, which is native to Asia.

The problem in this case is the Army Corps wants the end result to be a freshwater marsh that caters to the many birds that get funneled down to southern Cape May County due to geography and migration mistakes made by immature birds.

Ruth Fisher, a Dennis Township environmentalist fighting the spraying, said the decision is only a "pseudo victory" as long as herbicides are still used. But Fisher also noted that the green groups used the pesticide regulations "to the hilt" to help force the aerial cancellation, and that could be significant.

"I hope other agencies about to use poisons think twice before they cavalierly act. We'll be looking into enforcement of regulations," Fisher said.